Christmas Seal Campaign

In 1907, Emily Bissell, a member of the Red Cross, began a fund-raising campaign to support her local sanitarium. She sold “Christmas Seals,” an additional decorative stamp for holiday mail. The campaign went national the next year after an endorsement by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. It was sponsored by the Red Cross until 1919, then by the National Tuberculosis Association, later renamed the American Lung Association. The double-barred cross appeared for the first time on a Christmas Seal in 1920 and is still used today.

After Koch isolated the tubercle bacillus, medical care and public health campaigns addressed the means of contagion. Patients were further isolated at remote sanitariums and healthful habits, such as covering one’s face when sneezing or coughing and the eradication of spitting, were promoted.

In 1943 a graduate student at Rutgers University, Albert Schatz, isolated streptomycin—a bactericidal antibiotic effective against a virulent strain of tuberculosis. His research was part of the work of Dr. Selman Waksman, who alone received the Nobel Prize for streptomycin in 1952. After its discovery, patients could be cured, though sometimes with lingering damage, and TB finally began to lose its stigma as a death sentence and disease of degenerates. Physicians concentrated on identifying those who tested positive on tuberculin tests and preventing them from progressing to full-blown TB.

Infection rates vary widely around the world today. In Asia and Africa, up to 80% of the population tests positive with increasing numbers progressing to full TB due to immune systems weakened by AIDS or drug use. In the U.S. 5-10% of the population tests positive with about 25,000 new cases per year. Approximately 40% of the new cases are immigrants from countries with endemic TB. Streptomycin and later drugs have produced resistant strains of the disease, which are a growing problem today.